

Lost in the woods

by Robin West

Most years the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge gets actively involved in search and rescue efforts to find someone who gets turned around while out hiking or hunting. I say “turned around” because most of us don’t like to use the word “lost.” Sometimes, however, folks just plain get lost. It can happen to anyone. The condition in which we ultimately find these folks is largely dependent upon how prepared they were physically and mentally before they went into the woods.

Everyone who travels in the woods should carry a personal survival kit and suitable outdoor clothing. I suggest the minimum survival items should include dependable fire building supplies, something with which to build a small shelter (such as a tinfoil space blanket), and some high-energy foods. Clothing should include layers of warm material that will retain your body heat even if wet (such as wool or polar fleece). Always tell someone where you are going, when you expect to get back, and what to do if you don’t make it back on time. This can make a huge difference in having a short and successful search and rescue effort versus a long and wide-ranging wild goose chase.

Many people are carrying cell phones nowadays, and these have definitely helped locate some lost souls. They are especially valuable if there is any possibility of a medical emergency that might require a helicopter Medivac.

Keeping from getting lost has been a life-long goal of mine (and someday I may achieve it). Having, and knowing how to use, a good compass is the key. I say a good compass in remembering a story my Dad once told me about the Tate’s Compass Company. Supposedly the compasses were so unreliable that a saying was formed: he who has a Tate’s is lost. Seriously, most compasses function adequately, but they can be adversely affected by being in close proximity to metal (such as belt buckles, knives, gun barrels, or the hood of a car). Also, regular readings should be taken with the compass at the beginning of a trip. Pulling out the compass after you are already lost may be of little value unless you have previous knowledge about the general lay of the land. Finally, remember that magnetic north lies 24 degrees to the east of true north on

the Kenai Peninsula.

I find it extremely easy to get completely turned around on Refuge forests. The sky is often cloudy, so the sun direction isn’t available. Our forests tend to be very homogeneous and look the same in every direction on a cloudy day, and the trees are often tall and dense enough to block the view of the mountains to the east. Road noise from the Sterling Highway is helpful if you are within a few miles of the Highway. If you are in the Swanson River Road area or further north, you can get oriented by noting that the larger planes often fly on a northeast-southwest line between the Kenai and Anchorage airports.

Nowadays backcountry travelers can use a GPS (global positioning system) unit, which is a neat compact device that act as a receiver for location information transmitted from satellites. If you plan on using one of these instruments, be sure and practice with it before you get off the beaten path. They can be very confusing when you are cold and wet, and don’t know which button to push.

GPS owners should know that some GPS units on and after August 22, 1999 might be affected by the “end-of-week rollover.” This is sort of a Y2K issue that has important safety implications. The GPS end-of-week rollover happens every 1,024 weeks (about every 20 years). When the GPS counter rolls back to zero weeks, any of the following could happen: the unit will be unable to locate satellites, more time than usual may be necessary to locate satellites, or, the unit may appear to be working correctly but will display inaccurate information. You may wish to check with the manufacturer to see if you should expect problems with your particular GPS unit after August 21.

I suspect that a few folks will be caught by surprise and get angry when their GPS units don’t perform up to their expectations in the near future. As for me, I intend to blame my non-Y2K compliant GPS, as well as my Tate’s compass, if I happen to get turned around in the near future.

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